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COMM 435 - Editorial Writing

Change of Pace Editorial: **Splitting 714 is just another part of the change**

AT&T, MCI, Sprint, Pacific Bell, and GTE: it's all telecommunications alphabet soup. Whenever the phone company proposes a change, the public runs for cover.

Earlier this week GTE and Pacific Bell issued a proposal to split the region served by the 714 area code (Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino counties) into two area codes.

Over-reacting to the proposal, LA Times staff writer Sonni Efron lamented about poor Orange Countians having to change their business cards and stationery.

"Almost as bad as the prospect of moving, it's the threat that Ma Bell's evil offspring may yank away your familiar 714 area code and reclassify you---and half the people in your Rolodex---as 909," Efron moaned.

Of course the change won't take place for another three years.

Perhaps what Efron and the public doesn't realize is that it is the nature of the telecommunications business to change. Splitting area codes is only the latest development in a history of continuous change.

Pacific Bell, formerly Pacific Telephone, the alleged evil offspring of AT&T, shares with AT&T a history that reaches back to the days when radio and television networks were dependent on the Bell System to reach correspondents and audiences beyond the ring of local mountains and hills. It's unseen switchmen share an oral history that the mountains and hills would be envious of.

Heavy copper cabling has been replaced by hairlike fiber optics. Switching equipment that 20 years ago filled five floors of a large downtown phone installation now sits in a space the size of most living rooms. Thunderous electro-mechanical contacts have been replaced by silent electronics. The phone company is the birth place of the transistor and digital electronics. In this maelstrom of change no one can mark the passage of time like the switchmen who have manned the machines over the decades.

Forget about the touted dilemmas of splitting area codes for a moment, Pacific Bell harkens from a time of Wild Wild West personalities suffering under the management of AT&T executives from "back East."

A switchman in the not-so-ancient community of Irvine recently recalled the story about the weekly poker game in one of the Los Angeles offices where the players packed six-shooters. After midnight, when the evening crew had gone home, a small group of evening and day workers conducted their business in a friendly uneventful manner. One night, however, one of the players decided during a lull in the game to take a shot at an empty beer can. The player hit the can squarely but failed to remember about the working phone equipment directly behind his target.

The old electro-mechanical switching equipment could handle a lot of mistreatment but it wasn't impervious to gunshot. The wounded piece of equipment, in the words of the switchmen, "fell on its ass." The terrified switchmen worked feverishly through the remainder of the night replacing the bent and blasted switches with equipment from an unused section of the machine before the bosses showed up in the morning. The incident went unnoticed by management. In today's digital reality that replacement could not have taken place.

Another veteran in Irvine told the story about working in the multi-storied

Compton office during the Watts riots. Phone company installations being well-fortified and mostly windowless in those days, the predominantly white workers were not in any immediate danger. But the curious, being trapped in the building for the duration of the violence, were cautioned against going to the roof of the building. The building was said to have been surrounded by police sharp shooters. The company said that it didn't want any of its workers mistaken for alleged snipers.

Another Orange County veteran recalled when the women were segregated to operator positions and the men to the switching rooms in the office in downtown Anaheim. Somehow they managed to get together, he said, with results that never managed to make it into the company newsletter.

Splitting area codes and ruined stationery, bah humbug. The useless business cards and 714 area code will all become just another part of the growing catalog of memories. But one suspects it probably pales in comparison to the one time when company evening mail couriers were driving their company vans off the end of a not-yet completed freeway for fun . . .

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